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ABSTRACT

This research was undertaken to determine (1) if students in open and traditional classrooms perceive themselves as significant decision-makers; (2) if they perceive opportunities for decision making; and (3) if congruence exists between student and teacher perceptions of the decision-making process. Selected pupils and their teachers from five open and five traditional first- and second-grade classrooms were administered the "Who Decides" questionnaire and the Evans Teacher Questionnaire. Analysis of the data revealed: (1) that students and teachers from the open classrooms perceive more student-made decisions, and teachers from both types of classrooms perceive students as making more decisions than the students themselves perceive; (2) students and teachers from both types of classrooms perceive few items on the "Who Decides" instrument as class-made decisions; (3) traditional students and teachers perceive more teacher-made decisions than do the open students and teachers, and students from both types of classrooms perceive more teacher-made decisions than the teachers perceive themselves as making; and (4) students and teachers from both types of classrooms perceive few items on the "Who Decides" instrument as being made by someone other than the child, class, or teacher. (MJB)

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF STUDENT AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS REGARDING DECISION-MAKING IN SELECTED OPEN AND TRADITIONAL CLASSROOMS

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In recent years there has been an educational trend toward a less structured and more child-oriented curriculum. The term most commonly associated with this trend in education is "Open Education" (Walberg & Thomas, 1972).

Open Education is characterized by a classroom environment in which there is a minimum of teaching to the class as a whole. Provision is made for children to pursue individual interests and to be actively involved with materials and other children. It is an environment in which children are trusted to direct many aspects of their own learning. It is a form of organization which permits the child to exercise a greater degree of choice about what he is going to do, when he is going to do it, and with whom. The Open Teacher is considered a facilitator of learning; one who fashions the school environment so that learning and progress take place. Shared decision-making distinguishes the Open Classroom from the "Free School" where fewer limitations are placed upon students.

In contrast, students in Traditional classrooms are often given less opportunity for making choices about the things that affect them and their

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learning. Traditional Teachers tend to dictate a prescribed curriculum for all children which is reinforced by groups that are based upon age, schedule, letter grades, textbooks, lesson plans, and standarized tests (Minuchin, Biber, Shapiro & Zimiles, 1969).

Much has been written about the assumptions and beliefs of Open Educators regarding the nature of learning, childhood and schooling (Barth 1969, Rathbone 1970, and Bussis and Chittenden 1970). Walberg and Thomas (1971) have conceptually verified a number of salient features and characteristics of Open Education by advocates of Open Education. Their findings tend to reinforce the viewpoint of the Open Student as a significant decision-maker in fashioning the learning environment. To date, most studies in this area describe the Open Classroom, its identifiable characteristics and the role of the student and the teacher. Yet little is known regarding students' perceptions of the learning environment or the opportunities they perceive for decision-making.

Most studies concerned with educational decision-making have been conducted at the secondary and college level. Few studies assess young children's perceptions regarding decision-making (Wolfson & Nash 1965, 1968). Literature in the areas of student decision-making suggests that there is disparity in the perceptions held by teachers and those held by students (Ford 1971 & Denning 1970).

This study was undertaken to determine if students in Open and Traditional Classrooms perceive themselves as significant decision-makers and to determine if students perceive opportunities for decisions. Congruence between students' and teachers' perceptions of decision-making roles was also examined.

DESIGN

Subjects

The sample for this study consisted of the classroom teacher and a random sample of fifteen pupils from each of five Open and five Traditional first and second grade classrooms.

Selection of the classrooms was determined by teacher scores derived from the Evans Teacher Questionnaire (1971), an instrument which differentiates between Open and Traditional classrooms.

Instrument

The Who Decides questionnaire developed by Wolfson and Nash (1968) was selected to assess teachers' and childrens' perceptions of selected classroom procedures. The questionnaire was revised so as to be representative of both Open and Traditional Classrooms. The instrument was designed to determine how closely children's perceptions of decision-making roles agree with their teacher's expressed perceptions.

The instrument consists of fifty items. Each item asks the child to identify whether he, the class, the teacher, or someone else is responsible for making certain classroom decisions. The majority of the items on the instrument are related to the planning and scheduling of classroom activities. Some of the items are related to administrative activities such as housekeeping and organization in the classroom. Other items deal with what are traditionally known as the academic areas.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to check the face validity and relia-

bility of the revised Who Decides instrument. From the study it was determined that all items were within the realm of comprehension of six, seven and eight year olds and suitable for the purposes of this study. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to determine reliability for teachers' and for pupils' responses. A coefficient correlation of .98 was found for the pupils and .93 for the teachers.

Procedure

The instrument was administered orally and individually to the children selected to participate in the study. For each item on the instrument, the subjects were asked to identify the decision-maker (person or persons) usually responsible for the decision in each of the selected classroom activities. Responses were recorded in one of four categories--Child, Class, Teacher or Other.

Each teacher participating in the study completed a questionnaire for each of the fifteen pupils selected and one as she viewed the entire class. This was done to limit the teachers's viewpoint to each child rather than the class as a whole.

Analysis of the Data

Five hypotheses were tested in this study. A one way analysis of variance (two-tailed test) was used in testing the first hypothesis while the remaining four were tested with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K & S) statistical test (Brooks, 1972).

The K & S was used to determine if pupils and/or teachers responded the same way to each of the items on the questionnaire. Open Teachers were compared with Open Students and with Traditional Teachers, Traditional

Teachers were compared with Traditional Students and with Open Teachers, and Open Students were compared with Traditional Students.

The five hypotheses tested in this study are as follows:

H:1 There will be no difference in the number of decisions which students perceive they make in Open and Traditional Classrooms.

H:2 For each questions, there will be no difference in the responses between the teachers and the students in the Open classrooms.

H:3 For each question, there will be no difference in the responses between the teachers and the students in the Traditional Classrooms.

H:4 For each question, there will be no difference in the responses between the teachers in the Open Classrooms and the teachers in the Traditional Classrooms.

H:5 For each question, there will be no difference in the responses between the students in the Open Classrooms and the students in the Traditional Classrooms.

RESULTS

The data from the Who Decides instrument which is displayed in Tables 1 and 2 and Figure 1 indicates that students in Open Classrooms perceive themselves as making significantly more decisions than do students in Traditional Classrooms. A total of 409 responses, or a mean score of 5.45 was recorded in the Child category for students in the Traditional Classrooms. A total of 1706 responses or a mean score of 22.75 was recorded in the Child category for students in the Open Classrooms.

The following are the major findings for the five hypotheses of this study:

1. Students in the Open Classrooms perceive significantly more

TABLE 1

TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONSES IN THE CHILD CATEGORY AND MEAN SCORES OF OPEN AND TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ON THE WHO DECIDES INSTRUMENT

	No. of Students	No. of Responses Child Category	Mean Scores
Traditional Classrooms	75	409	5.45
Open Classrooms	75	1706	22.75
Level of Significance			P = .001

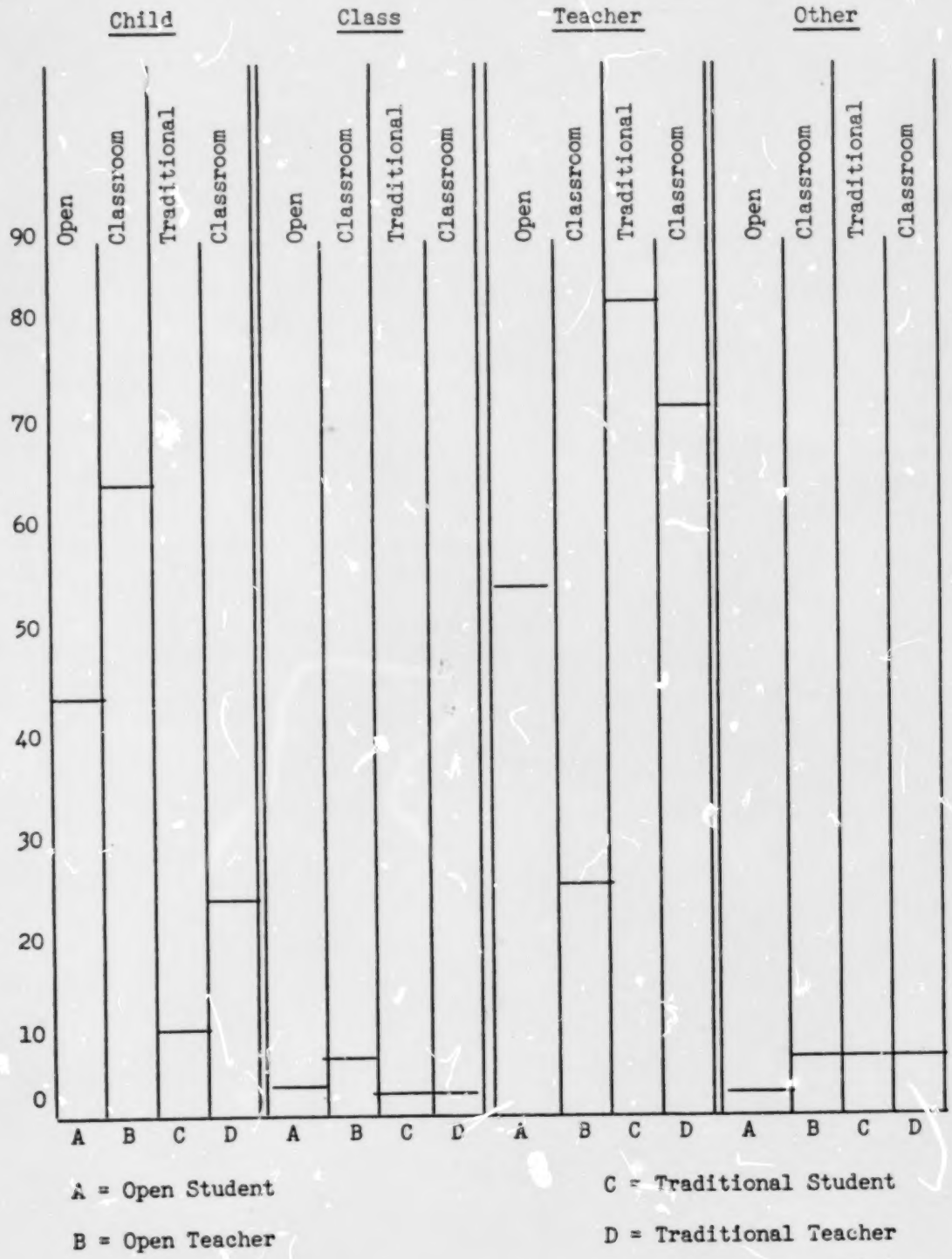
TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' RESPONSES FOR EACH CATEGORY ON THE WHO DECIDES INSTRUMENT

	Students' Responses N = 75 Open 75 Traditional				Teachers' Responses N = 5 Open 5 Traditional			
	Child (Self)	Class	Teacher	Other	Child	Class	Teacher	Other
Open Classroom	46%	2%	52%	1%	64%	5%	28%	4%
Traditional Classroom	11%	1%	84%	4%	25%	1%	70%	4%

FIGURE 1

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' RESPONSES
FOR EACH CATEGORY ON THE WHO DECIDES



student-made decisions than do the students in the Traditional Classrooms.

2. There is a significant difference in the perceptions of Open Teachers and Open Students regarding the decision-maker for nearly half (24 of the 50) of the items on the Who Decides instrument. Variance in student and teacher perceptions occurred in all areas of planning and scheduling, housekeeping and organization, and the academic areas.

3. There is a significant difference in the perceptions of Traditional Students and Traditional Teachers regarding the decision-maker for approximately one-third (17 of the 50) of the items on the Who Decides instrument. Traditional Students and their Teachers are more alike in their perceptions regarding the decision-maker than are the Open Students and their Teachers. As in the Open Classrooms, variance in Traditional Student and Teacher perceptions occurred in all areas of planning and scheduling, housekeeping and organization, and the academic areas.

4. There is a significant difference in the perceptions of Open and Traditional Teachers regarding the decision-maker for the majority of the items on the Who Decides instrument. Open and Traditional Teachers are in agreement for only one-fifth (10 of the 50) of the items on the instrument. Items pertaining to planning and scheduling, and housekeeping and organization are those areas for which teachers are most in agreement.

5. There is a significant difference in the perceptions of Open

and Traditional Students regarding the decision-maker for the majority of the items on the Who Decides instrument. Students from both types of classrooms are in agreement for only one-third (19 of the 50) of the items on the instrument. Greatest variance in Open and Traditional Students' perceptions occurred in the areas of housekeeping and organization, and the academic areas.

The following are the major findings for each of the categories on the Who Decides instrument:

Child Category

There is a significant difference in the number of responses between the Open and the Traditional Classrooms. Students and teachers from the Open Classrooms perceive more student-made decisions. Teachers from both types of classrooms perceive students as making more decisions than the students themselves as making.

Class Category

There is no significant difference in the number of responses between Open and Traditional Classrooms or between students' and teachers' responses in this category. Students and teachers from both types of classrooms perceive few items on the Who Decides instrument as class-made decisions.

Teacher Category

There is a significant difference in the number of responses

between the Open and Traditional Classrooms. Traditional Students and Teachers perceive more teacher-made decisions than do the Open Students and Teachers. Students from both types of classrooms perceive more teacher-made decisions than the teachers perceive themselves as making.

Other Category

There is no significant difference in the number of responses between Open and Traditional Classrooms or between students' and teachers' responses in this category. Students and teachers from both types of classrooms perceive few items on the Who Decides instrument as being made by someone other than the child, class, or the teacher.

DISCUSSION

If indeed shared decision-making is a goal of Open Educators, this study gives some evidence that the organization of the Open Classroom does provide for greater student decision-making.

The variance in responses between the students and teachers from the Open and Traditional Classrooms indicates that not all students perceive the same opportunities for decision-making. This tends to reinforce the perceptual theory that exposure to an event does not ensure the same perceptions on the part of all participants.

If teachers are interested in knowing children's perceptions of classroom procedures, then they must have some means of identifying the congruence between their perceptions and those of their students. The

Who Decides instrument and procedures used in this study can aid teachers in identifying the areas for which children perceive decision-making roles in the classroom which in turn should lead toward a better understanding of children's behavior. As a result of this information, teachers can verify their perceptions as well as the perceptions of their students, and as needed, change classroom procedures to be more in keeping with the goals that both teachers and students value.

Since a variance in students' and teachers' perceptions was evident in both the Open and Traditional Classrooms, a variety of explanations suggest themselves.

One explanation of this finding lies in social theories of institutional life. From this viewpoint, the discrepancy between teachers and students is rooted in differences in perceptions of power commonly held by different classes of people in institutions. Pupils tend to view the teacher as having power over them--one who directs and controls classroom events. The fact that the Traditional Students' perceived few opportunities for decision-making could be that they viewed their teachers as having almost total power over their classroom environment.

A second explanation is the belief that teachers seldom check their perceptions against their pupils' perceptions. Children may not be aware of the opportunities for decision-making in their classrooms. On the other hand, students may perceive the teachers' indirect communication that decisions have to satisfy the teacher even though the teacher thinks she allows children to decide.

Two observations for this study stand out. First, children in both Open and Traditional Classrooms did not perceive the opportunities

for decision-making which were available to them at least as perceived by their teachers. If Open Teachers perceive students as deciding how well they are doing in their work, then it is important that Open Teachers create the awareness of that opportunity to their students.

A second observation from the findings in this study is that Open Students do in fact perceive themselves as making a significant number of decisions in their classrooms. This is consistent with the literature in the field of Open Education which indicates that Open Teachers value student participation in shared classroom decision-making. The Open Teachers', by their responses to items on the Evans Teacher Questionnaire and on the Who Decides instruments, reaffirmed this belief.

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